

# A Literacy Spring Cleaning: Sweeping Round Robin Reading Out of Your Classroom

by Katherine Hilden and Jennifer Jones

**T**he classroom is quiet. All the students have the same book open on their desks. One student is reading aloud. Other students are counting ahead or gazing out into space. The student who just finished reading sighs with relief when her turn is over.

We're describing Round Robin Reading (RRR) or one of its many variations. We've all done it or at least seen it. In fact, over half of K-8 teachers report using RRR or some variation of it in their instruction (Ash, Kuhn, & Walpole, 2009). In RRR, all students are expected to follow along while individual students take turns reading, usually moving in a predictable pattern (e.g., up and down rows or around tables). However, this ever-popular instructional practice enjoys little research support.

So what explains RRR's popularity? First, some variations of Round Robin Reading lead to a superficial level of engagement. Popcorn Reading (students read aloud in "random order"), Combat Reading (students call on one another to read, trying to catch each other "off task"), and Popsicle Reading (teacher writes students' names on popsicle sticks and then randomly pulls the sticks to determine reading order) all involve oral reading *without prior practice* with the text. In these variations, students never know when they will be called on and are forced to follow along in the text. In fact, while many teachers seem to know that they should not be using Round Robin Reading, they report that these variation strategies are less damaging (Ash, et al., 2009).

This perception leads to the second perceived benefit—classroom management. In classrooms where RRR happen, it is usually quiet except for the one student reading. Thus, it is also an easy way to plan for a reading lesson as it is often applied to the whole class. Teachers also report using RRR to assess students' fluency levels (Ash, et. al., 2009). Finally, RRR can often be found in the content area instruction as an attempt to make sure that all students are reading the same material.

However, the drawbacks of RRR and its many variations far outweigh the benefits. First, we know of no research evidence that supports the claim that RRR actually contributes to students becoming better readers, either in terms of their fluency or comprehension. A list of drawbacks includes:

- **Slower Reading Rates.** Opitz and Rasinski (1998) explain that oral reading is typically much slower than silent reading. RRR encourages the audience to follow along and sub-vocalize along with the student reading aloud. Therefore, a large proportion of the audience is likely reading slower than they were if they were reading silently to themselves.
- **Lower Quantity.** Related to the first point, if RRR occurs frequently in a classroom, it may actually lower the quantity of reading that individual students do over the course of a year. In a classroom of 20 students, it is likely that a child may read one twentieth of the time during a single reading period. This is simply not enough. Struggling readers particularly need access to connected text, which RRR limits because they are only reading small pieces of text at a time.
- **Off-task behaviors.** In RRR, all students are expected to follow along while students take turns reading, usually moving up and down rows or tables. One can often observe dysfluent and anxious students who are counting the sentences or paragraphs to find and repeatedly practice their section that they are responsible. Once they read, they may breathe a sigh of relief and mentally check out from the duration of the RRR activity.
- **Models of Dysfluent Reading.** Effective modeling is central to research-based fluency instruction. Students need to hear passages that are accurately read at an appropriate pace with prosody (appropriate phrasing and expression). Listening to peers read passages slowly, with many halting stutters and mistakes, does not accomplish this objective.
- **Problems with Comprehension.** By itself, RRR will not help students comprehend better. RRR



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does not encourage active meaning-making. Passively listening to the words as read by a peer does not mirror the comprehension processes used by effective comprehenders. Further, the time off-task spent counting paragraphs and pages ahead impedes comprehension.

- **Problems with Self-Efficacy and Motivation.** RRR frequently causes self-esteem issues for students, especially those who struggle with reading. Reading aloud in a whole class setting frequently means public correction of reading mistakes, either by the teacher or peers (Allington, 1980). This also leads to fewer opportunities to self-correct these mistakes. Being forced to read aloud without opportunity to practice in advance causes many students considerable anxiety and embarrassment, which can lead to the reading-ahead behaviors discussed previously. Combat Reading seems especially harmful to students' reading motivation. We have had reports of "reading bullying" where students intentionally pick on struggling readers as a way to make fun of them during Combat Reading.

Consider replacing RRR with instruction that provides students with motivating and authentic opportunities for repeated reading. Students who participate in repeated reading demonstrate better word identification, accuracy, and speed when reading (National Reading Panel, 2000).

- **Timed Repeated Reading:** Students read short passages at their instructional reading level (read with 90-95% accuracy). First, a teacher or adult should model reading the passage accurately with expression. Then students practice reading the passage silently. Next the students read the passage aloud as quickly as possible while still maintaining appropriate expression. Another student or the teacher records mistakes and times the reading. The student then graphs the speed and mistakes. This is repeated numerous times. Over time students can monitor their progress. By graphing the results, students are given visible reminders of their reading growth.

- **Readers Theater:** Readers Theater involves a dramatic reading of a script by multiple students. A group of students rehearse by rereading their lines over the course of a week and then performing for their peers. The performance usually involves minimal props and costumes. Rather, the plot and emotion of the story is conveyed by the students' expressive reading, making readers theater an excellent way to improve prosody. In addition to benefitting students' fluency, readers theatre also has the potential to engage students in the text in order to bring the characters and the action of the story to life. (We recommend Young & Rasinski, 2005, for more information on this strategy.)



*A process that involves teacher modeling and authentic reasons for multiple readings can provide struggling readers access to otherwise difficult texts.*

- **Fluency-Oriented Reading Instruction (FORI):** This fluency instructional routine was designed as a whole class approach (grades 2 and older) that used selections from grade-level basal readers (Stahl & Heubach, 2005). Through a weekly cycle of teacher modeling, echo, choral, and partner reading, FORI scaffolds students through texts that might otherwise be deemed too difficult for struggling readers. We particularly like FORI because comprehension is a key focus, woven into the weekly framework. Teachers have now successfully applied FORI to small groups and with a wider range of texts including trade books and literature anthologies (Kuhn, 2009).
- **Peer-Assisted Learning Strategies (PALS):** The teacher matches low and high-need students in ways that both readers can actively contribute

to the partnership (e.g., Fuchs, Fuchs, Mathes, & Simmons, 1997). The partners take turns being the *Coach* and the *Reader*. The pair cycles through reading, rereading, and retelling. Similar to FORI, PALS integrates comprehension strategies such as, summarizing, predicting, and asking questions.

## References

*Note to the Reader: We have starred the references that are especially teacher friendly.*

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